

LOI Albania 2014 conference
Presentation on Cross of Nails project in Romania
By Geoff Kimber

This is a brief reflection on our five years in Romania, and on some of the principles which guided Gill and myself in our work.

A. Three initial explanations

- **My denominational background**

- I was brought up in a Strict and Particular (hyper Calvinist) church, sure that we were the only true church in the town. After college I worked in Africa where I was baptised into the Cameroon Baptist Church. I came home, married, and together we trained for mission and spent ten years in Nigeria with an interdenominational mission. When we returned to the UK I was received into the Anglican Church, later ordained and served in two parishes. In 2002 we went to Romania for 5 years to run a small “Cross of nails” ecumenical centre in Sibiu.
- **The Coventry cross of nails community**¹ is run from Coventry Cathedral. It emerged from the destruction of the Cathedral in 1944 and is now a world-wide community of groups seeking to bring reconciliation in many different situations.
- **The ecumenical centre in Sibiu:** This was established by an Anglican priest who with his wife moved to Romania after the fall of communism. Most of their work was medical and social but they had a vision to open such a centre, which they asked the Anglican Church Mission Society to find someone to run. We responded, having worked at Coventry Cathedral and knowing something of the community. This paper is a reflection on some of what we learned about working with different confessions there.

B. Two great principles for our work

We learned the importance of two great principles in this work – Humility and Love

1. Humility

- **Humility of sinners:** The morning after the bombing of the Coventry Cathedral, the provost went into the shell of the cathedral and wrote two words on the wall of the chancel : Father Forgive. There is an important principle embedded in the grammar of this sentence – there ought to be a third word – should it be Father Forgive THEM – who have destroyed our wonderful mediaeval cathedral. Should it be Father forgive US – we were also doing terrible things to the enemy. The two words stand there reminding us that both We and our enemies equally need forgiveness. And this is the first principle of reconciliation – both sides stand as sinners needing the forgiveness of a loving Heavenly Father.
- **Humility not to consider ourselves better than the other.**
I was welcomed into both the Evangelical pastors’ prayer meetings and also at the Protopopiat meetings of the eighty local Orthodox clergy. One day the pastors said to me, “Geoff, how do you get on with the Orthodox priests? Are they good guys, are they Christians?” I told them, “Most of them are good guys – but there are a few rascals. In fact they’re rather like you guys.” An Orthodox priest said to me one day, “I thought the Lord was being gracious to me – the Pentecostal meeting in my parish is closing.... but the devil is still determined to bother me – a new Baptist group is about to open!”
- **Humility to listen**
I owe a great debt to those who trained me for mission and taught me to listen to other cultures. Martin Goldsmith, David Morris at All Nations Missionary College², and also a small Welsh nurse, Jean Oliver,

¹ See <http://www.crossofnails.org/>

² See <http://www.allnations.ac.uk/>

who taught us to speak Hausa, and told us it was of God's mercy that we could not immediately speak to the Hausa people because we had so much to learn first about their culture and thinking. Over five months she taught us both language, and culture – to understand what the local population thought, why they thought it, and to sympathise with where they were coming from.

- **Humility to realise God is already at work:**

An archdeacon friend of mine recalls travelling out to Romania and sitting next to a missionary on the plane who said "We are taking the Lord Jesus to Romania" Granville replied, "How strange, last time I visited He seemed to be already there!" I was graciously admitted as a member of the Sibiu evangelical missionary men's prayer meeting. They received me with warmth and puzzlement, though sometimes I could be a the burr under the saddle for them – as when a visiting missionary from the south of the country told us he was ministering in an area of 200 villages with "no Christian witness". I replied, "Don't any of these villages have one of those peculiar buildings with funny pointy things on the roof?" To which he replied – Orthodox churches – they're not Christian!

- **Humility to work with the other.**

In preparing for our work in Romania I discovered the work of **David Bjork**³, who was sent as a church planter to France, but finished up encouraging faith in the Catholic churches there. He wrote two books, one called "Unfamiliar Paths" and the later one is subtitled "Learning to walk hand in hand when you do not see eye to eye." This ability to work with others shaped our ministry profoundly.

- **Humility to learn from and be enriched by the other**

Our five years were for us a time of enormous enrichment as we learned for the first time so much about the Orthodox Church. We learned to appreciate the Holy Liturgy. In the early stages of language learning, an evangelical missionary friend asked me: "Geoff, how do you cope with that liturgy?" I replied, "Where else can you get a two hour uninterrupted quiet time?" We also read from the Church Fathers, and from the Paris Orthodox Theologians, and read some biographies. It challenged our approach to scripture, and showed us new ways of drawing close to God.

2. Love

In our little centre, we put up this quotation from St. Augustine: **In essentials, unity, In non-essentials, liberty In all things, love.** Loving the other had to be at the heart of our work, and encouraging others to do the same as they met together.

- **Love seeks the welfare of the other.**

People sometimes asked me if I was going to open an Anglican church in the town. On the contrary, I saw our role as about encouraging the existing church – if, when we left, the people who came to our centre were stronger in their allegiance to their own church, , more encouraged as Christians, then it seemed to me that part of our task was done. Equally I was anxious to ensure that the students who came were not seeking a way out of Orthodoxy, but a way to understand their faith better. The Jewish diaspora were told to pray for the cities they moved to⁴. I felt that was our job as well.

- **Love trusts and seeks to earn trust**

In Sibiu, there were some who distrusted our motives. We sought always to be consistent in what we said and how we behaved and especially, to be open about our involvement with "the other side." We did not want to pretend to be something we were not. I was in a Baptist church service one Sunday, and a friend said, "You've got some guts wearing a clerical collar here!" I replied, "Wait till I come to church in a cassock!" I never did, but the collar was one of the ways in which I tried always to be the same person.

³ Unfamiliar Paths, by David E Bjork ISBN 9781326018863 and As Pilgrims Progress - Learning how Christians can walk hand in hand when they don't see eye to eye By Stephen John March & David Bjork ISBN 978-1593303679

⁴ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." **Jeremiah 29:7 NIV**

In the same way, one or two Orthodox Priests would invite me to receive the Holy Sacrament, which I would have loved to do. I always refused because it was part of the trust that had been placed in me that I would keep to the rules.

- **Love does not fear the other** (“not like home”)

So much of the rejection I see of one church by another is a rejection of the unfamiliar. And the conviction that real Christianity looks just like our own version. The story went around about the Roman Catholics from the very rural fastnesses who went to see the Pope on his visit to Bucharest. But they were appalled by the way he celebrated the mass – not the same as their own priest at all. They came away saying, “If that’s the pope, then the Pope is not Catholic!” We all have a tendency to reject what is “not like home.” Love explores to see if this other is also an expression of genuine Christian faith.

- **Love includes Confidence in what you are and believe**

One of the things that unites the Orthodox with the Strict Baptists of my youth is the fear that ecumenism is a matter of surrendering some of one’s beliefs. Metropolitan Andrei Andreucut for whom I had the privilege of working in our two final years once said to me that no one is ready for ecumenical discussion until they are sure what they believe. In our centre students were not really in a position to take part in discussions if they were not clear and indeed passionate about what their church believed.

- **Love befriends:**

Jesus told his disciples to accept hospitality from the man of peace as they went out. We found ourselves drawn to an amazing variety of new friends – I sometimes felt that my primary gifting for ecumenical work was my ability to drink coffee! Many of these friendships still continue.

C. Practicalities – a quick resume of what we actually did.

- **Joining in with what is there:** We found the historic churches of Sibiu (Hungarian reformed, Catholic, Lutheran, Greco-Catholic and Orthodox) already did stuff together in which we could be involved.

- United services for Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
- United Walk of witness for Good Friday
- We added a new ecumenical event to this list – An annual Christmas Nine lessons and carols service kindly hosted by the Lutheran Cathedral in English
- Monthly joint evening meetings for clergy of the five historic churches.
- Regular denominational meetings of Clergy – as mentioned above, both Orthodox and Neo-Protestants made me welcome .

- **Running Our small centre:**

- **Library:** Our centre was set up as a resource for students and clergy of the city, and to help this we were able to assemble a theological library of about 1500 books. There was room to read and study.
- **Abortion** was an issue which all churches were deeply concerned about, and Gill got together an ecumenical team of young women who went out to various locations to talk to women’s groups about childbirth and abortion.
- **Language learning:** Both Gill and I taught English classes in our centre to students and clergy.
- **Providing a place of safety**
Discussion groups of various sorts took place from time to time in our centre . It was a joy to introduce people from different churches to each other for the first time and help people to network across denominational boundaries. It provided a safe place for people who could not normally approach each other to meet.

- Meeting people of other backgrounds : I remember pondering aloud at the end of one evening as to why a prominent Orthodox priest had come to a meeting with so many Baptists present. The response was; “Where else would he get the chance to meet them?”
- Discussing our common heritage (prayer, Easter, salvation)
- Inviting people of interest – CMS staff, Fr. Stephen Platt , Colin Bishop of Coventry. I remember Fr. Stephen talking about Orthodoxy in the UK and explaining that he was a convert to Orthodoxy. No one in the room had ever met a convert to Orthodoxy, and I knew of no priests who were. Afterwards an Orthodox priest commented “I need to think about this – why would anyone choose to be Orthodox!”
- **Teaching in other institutions**
 - Gill taught a variety of subjects in a local school at the invitation of the parish priest. We both taught a course at the Lutheran Theological Faculty, and she later taught Literature at the English Faculty in Alba Iulia.
 - I taught Courses on Anglicanism at the Theological Faculty in Sibiu and later a variety of subjects at the Orthodox Faculty in Alba Iulia including Anglicanism, the Western church, mission, responses to secularism, preaching, and catechesis in the West.

It is difficult to measure what our time achieved, but I have some good memories from our final days

- a Baptist Missionary telling me, “I’ve been reading John Chrysostom – tell your Orthodox friends if they are like him, count me in!”
- the picture of the Coventry Cathedral youth leader and a team of his young people leading a children’s mission in an Orthodox parish in Sibiu (complete with pink guitar).
- It was a delight to amalgamate the work of our centre with that of a Swiss Lutheran theologian, Stefan Tobler and his Centre for Ecumenical Research⁵
- I also treasure being at a conference of Orthodox priors and abbots and being told over dinner in the monastery the old joke a Baptist had told me a few days previously about visitors to heaven being told to creep past one room – because those there thought they were the only ones in heaven! It seemed both sides were getting the idea that we might one day share heaven.
- I hope we had also helped both sides to start talking to each other here on earth.

In conclusion, in our centre we hung a sign which summed up what we hoped was happening in our centre, and indeed is the key to all ecumenical work:

“The nearer we come to Christ, the nearer we are to each other.”

(Moltman, The Passion for Life,)

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⁵ Cross of Nails Centre for Ecumenical Research, Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu, Romania see: <http://www.ecum.ro/>